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The Romance of Politics and the Politics of Romance in Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton

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For all its evangelical Christian tenets, *Mary Barton* underscores the erroneousness and fatality of scapegoating the feminine, the erotic, and the romantic for social, political, and economic problems, whether a fallen woman for a working-class death, a flirtatious woman for a middle-class death, or the novel's romantic hero for a murder committed by its political hero. While factory worker John Barton blames his son's death on class-based economic inequities, he blames his wife's death on her fallen sister, Esther: 'It was she who had brought on all this sorrow. Her giddiness, her lightness of conduct, had wrought this woe'. In a similar rhetoric, characters blame John's daughter, flirtatious, socially ambitious Mary, for the murder of mill heir Harry Carson more than the man they believe committed the murder. Of the accused, Mary's working-class suitor, Jem Wilson, they opine: 'he's been ill-used, and – jilted ... and his blood has been up ... I don't over-blame him for this'; it was 'her light conduct which had led to such fatal consequences'. (*MB*, ch. 22, p. 248) Jem has not, it turns out, murdered Harry out of erotic rivalry and rash rage, but has been scapegoated for a crime plotted by trade unionists out of class rivalry and calculated revenge.

Yet in spite of the novel's clear critique of such scapegoating, many twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics have manifested the same tendencies to scapegoat the feminine, the erotic, and the romantic aspects of the novel for its social, aesthetic, and political failures. The criticism runs along two main lines. First, it castigates the romance of politics – that is, the melodramatic, sentimental, and romantic aspects of the political plot – for detracting from social realism and political commentary. Second, it critiques the politics of romance, Mary's courtship plot, for digressing from, diluting, or directly counterpointing John's political plot with a conservative politics.

In 1958, Raymond Williams influentially criticised the novel's romance of politics, its abandonment of its 'sympathetic' and 'imaginative' 'documentary record' of 'everyday life in working-class homes' for 'the familiar and orthodox plot of the Victorian novel of sentiment', which he dismissed as 'of

little lasting interest'.² In 1970, Stephen Gill maintained similarly that 'Mrs Gaskell progressively leads her reader out of the real world of the 1840s into the world of romance, into, that is, an altogether less demanding world' and into 'a different and a lesser genre ... a more simple fable which ends in a moral tableau'.³ In 1981, Rosemarie Bodenheimer adduced that the domestic and sentimental qualities that infuse John's political plot are 'apolitical', 'displacing attention from political issues to individual acts', and rendering 'political animus reducible to family sentiment'.⁴ Such criticisms, representative rather than exhaustive, read the romance of politics as contaminations of social realist representation and dilutions of social and political critique by generic strands of sentimentality, domesticity, melodrama, and courtship romance largely associated with female concerns and female readers.

Late twentieth-century feminist theory brought the politics of romance into focus: that is, the political, economic, and social aspects of sentimental, domestic, melodramatic and courtship fiction. In 1981, Bodenheimer read the politics of romance in *Mary Barton* as conservative, arguing that the courtship plot 'serves as an antidote and a release of the tensions established in' the political plot.⁵ In 1985, Ruth Bernard Yeazell concurred: 'Social and political anxieties are contained – and eased – in the narrative of ... a courtship', which serves 'in the novel as a bulwark against passion and revolution both'.⁶

In 1992, however, Hilary M. Schor challenged prevailing views of *Mary Barton*'s politics of romance, arguing that,

far from constituting a 'diversion' from the more serious, socially critical plot of *John Barton*, Mary's plot both echoes the questions of the more explicitly political novel, and questions the politics of the heroine's story, precisely through its innovations in form, its critique of narrative and social authority, its jumbling of public and private, through the very romantic plot dismissed by these critics.⁷

Concomitantly, in 1993 Jenny Uglow, building on work by Peter Brooks, challenged mainstream views regarding the novel's romance of politics, maintaining that the very melodrama castigated as apolitical or undermining political and social issues by other critics can 'express concepts of innocence, guilt and justice in ways which realism – or cool economic analysis – could not encompass'.⁸

But Schor and Uglow did not turn the tide of *Mary Barton* criticism. In 1997, Simon Dentith's Bakhtinian reading of *Mary Barton* concurred with earlier readings, arguing that the many sources and multiple genres of the novel are evidence of Gaskell's literary 'inexperience' and indicative of 'a radical [political] uncertainty'.⁹ In 2001, even as Harriet Guest forged an

important critique of the 'imaginative sympathy' for which Williams had praised the novel, she continued to read the novel's romantic and sentimental aspects as ambivalent middle-class retreats from social realism: 'Fantasy and romance mark the narrator's distance from reality', transforming historical Manchester 'by sympathy into the stuff of romance'.¹⁰

This essay argues that Gaskell places the romance plot alongside the political plot, infuses the political plot with romance, and injects the courtship plot with politics not from inexperience or ambivalence, but to teach readers how to assess the less familiar genre of the social, industrial, political plot. It argues further that the relationship between romance and politics in the novel is not one of counterpoint or dilution or ambivalence, but rather an inverse one, structured by analogy and a motif of alibi. The centuries-old use of analogy to teach new material by building on established concepts is here engaged to teach readers to interpret a new genre by analogy with a familiar one.¹¹ Joining analogy is a structuring principle of alibi, a motif that permeates the novel's structure as well as its plot. (A premise underlying this essay is that formalist dividing lines between plot and structure and narratological distinctions between diegetic and extradiegetic elements are by no means impermeable. Rather, motifs and ideologies, as well as rhetorical, narrative, and interpretive structures, traverse these lines.) 'Alibi' comes from the Latin for 'elsewhere'. A narrative structure of alibi teaches readers to look elsewhere. In *Mary Barton*, readers must look across the plots as well as to the romance of politics and the politics of romance in order to assess class relations. Contrary to critics who maintain that 'The intertwinings of the two main plots are ... arranged to defuse political issues',¹² then, this essay argues that intertwinings of romance and politics under structures of analogy and alibi intensify political issues. It maintains that the romance of politics – the melodramatic and sentimental aspects of John's political plot – supports a more radical political reading than do its polemic, didactic, social, realist aspects and that the politics of romance – the social, economic, political, legal, discursive, and polemic aspects of Mary's courtship plot – forges a more radical political reading than do its romantic, sentimental, and domestic aspects. Moreover, this essay avers that it is the romance plot, not the political plot, that contains the more radical political critique in the novel. Far from being a conservative antidote to the political plot, the courtship plot unleashes a defiant condemnation of higher-class exploitation where the social realist political plot fears to tread and does so not only or even primarily in feminist terms or through melodramatic conventions.

The inversions of my titular terms, 'romance of politics' and 'politics of romance' aptly express the inversely analogical, horizontal, elsewhere-looking

relations of the two plots. At the beginning of the novel, the rich are the villains of John's romance plot and the heroes of Mary's romance plot. John demonises the higher classes as the cause of his troubles; Mary idealises them as the remedy for hers. John's determination to share in the wealth and power of the rich stems from rage at political injustice; Mary's similar determination derives from romantic and materialistic infatuation. The inversions of romance and politics – quite strikingly – place John, not Mary, in bed in a rich man's arms at the end of the novel (*MB*, ch. 35, p. 372) and Mary at the centre of legal and political action.³ In the end, generic boundaries break down as the political plot turns to romantic melodrama for its resolution and the romance plot turns to legal and political action for its resolution.

In its lengthy, widely criticised quest for the alibi and the melodramatic conclusion of the political plot, *Mary Barton* rejects both scapegoating – the substitution of an innocent for a guilty party – and its melodramatic reverse – the vindication of an innocent party by the identification of a guilty one – in favour of alibi, which establishes innocence by placing a party elsewhere than at the scene and time of a crime rather than by locating a guilty party. The novel turns to alibi in its plot and structure not because Gaskell is uncertain of her political stance or of her craft, but because the novel rejects moral polarisations that can only establish innocence by guilt. It is precisely because such moral bipolarity persists today in much literary criticism (evil capitalists, innocent workers; ruthless patriarchs, oppressed women, and so on) that critics continue to castigate both Gaskell and *Mary Barton* for confusion and ambivalence and to scapegoat the romantic elements of the novel for its political failures. In these regards, their judgments differ little in essence from those of characters in the novel or Gaskell's Manchester readers, in spite of their position at the other end of the political spectrum.

Such an argument depends in part on distinguishing *Mary Barton*'s ambivalent, conservative, middle-class narrator from its author, Elizabeth Gaskell. In spite of New Critical taboos, Roland Barthes's obituary for the author, his/her dissection by psychoanalysis, fusion with the Jungian collective unconscious, construction by Foucauldian discourse, or dispersion in Bahktinian dialogics, poststructuralist semiotics, and postmodern fragmentation, critics continue to conflate Gaskell with her narrator. This essay maintains that *Mary Barton* manifests a marked tension between its narrator and its structure (plotted by its author) and that it is *Mary Barton*'s narrator rather than the novel's two-plot, mixed-genre structure who acts as buffer, underminer, and censor of its more radical politics.

Since many critics have discussed the narrator's censorious voice and conservative politics, I highlight here the narrator's criticisms of the high

emotions of working class politics. The narrator represents the emotionality of John's romance of politics as both immoral ('vengeance') and impractical: 'all [John's] feelings were theoretical, not practical'. (*MB*, ch. 3, p. 25) The narrator divorces John's political ideology from the civilised and the material: 'John Barton became a Chartist, a Communist, all that is commonly called wild and visionary'. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 170) S/he reduces John's eloquent, logical, and rational political speeches (one of them represented in ch. 6, on p. 66) to 'feelings put into words' (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 170), feelings s/he has just pathologised: 'The same state of feeling which John Barton entertained, if belonging to one who had had leisure to think of such things, and physicians to give names to them, would have been called monomania'. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 169) To pathology, the narrator adds the hallucinations of opium addiction. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 169)

The narrator extends a similar rhetoric to working-class activism: '*vindictive* feelings exhibited themselves in *rabid* politics' (*MB*, ch. 8, p. 85, emphases added); 'the strike was in this instance the consequence of want and need, suffered unjustly, as the endurers believed; for, however *insane*, and *without ground of reason*, such was their belief and such was the cause of their violence' (*MB*, ch. 16, p. 181, emphases added). Pathologised working-class emotion authorises middle-class dominance according to classical notions that reason must govern emotion:

Combination is an awful power. It is like the equally mighty agency of steam; capable of almost unlimited good or evil. But to obtain a blessing on its labours, it must *work under the direction of a high and intelligent will*; incapable of being misled by passion or excitement. The will of the operatives had not been guided to the calmness of wisdom. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 173, emphases added)

In the context of industrialising Manchester, the 'wisdom' and 'high and intelligent will' of the higher classes redirect working-class power and solidarity into manual labour for middle-class material and economic desires.

Not only does working-class 'passion' figure as an obstacle to 'unlimited good', but, for all the narrator's advocacy of middle-class sympathy, so does working-class sympathy:

... the only feeling that remained clear and undisturbed in the tumult of [John's] heart, was hatred to the one class, and keen sympathy with the other.

But what availed his sympathy? No education had given him wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 170)

Importantly for the melodramatic politics of the novel, working-class sympathy constructs the employing and governing classes as villains and the working classes as victims. In the absence of third-party heroes, workers must fight for and rescue themselves. By contrast, middle-class sympathy figures the working classes as victims and the middle classes as heroes, casting abstract forces, like the unfathomable and irresistible will of God (*MB*, ch. 6, p. 65), the equally mysterious and ineluctable cycles of economics, and the distant forces of foreign competition (*MB*, ch. 15, pp. 171–72), as villains.

This critique markedly contrasts with the epigraphic poem placed before Chapter 15 by the author and standing outside the narrator's purview:

What thoughtful heart can look into this gulf
That darkly yawns 'twixt rich and poor,
And not find food for saddest meditation!
Can see, without a pang of keenest grief,
Them fiercely battling (like some natural foes)
Whom God had made, with help and sympathy,
To stand as brothers, side by side, united!
Where is the wisdom that shall bridge this gulf,
And bind them once again in trust and love?

(*MB*, ch. 15, p. 168, emphasis added)

The poem advocates a mutual, non-hierarchical, side-by-side sympathy.

Gaskell must have been aware that middle-class readers were unlikely to accept a didactic polemic attack on their own economic interests in a social realist genre. Consequently, the ambivalent narrator functions to censor and mitigate, though never to occlude or overturn the novel's realist and polemic class critiques. Middle-class readers must look elsewhere for an uncensored critique of their class. Even as the narrator shifts unreliably between sympathy for, and fear of, the working classes, rushes to qualify, mitigate, and censor controversial working-class opinions, s/he remains silent on the wordless arguments and political critique forged by the parallels, interweavings, and inversions within and between Mary's and John's plots. The novel's structure of alibi, of looking elsewhere, opens a critical space where the narrator, as oblivious to inherences of politics and romance as John and the novel's Manchester, does not obtrude. Let us look at these dynamics in more detail.

The author's preface to *Mary Barton* didactically names the novel's genre 'romance': 'I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets'. It defines romance as a representation of 'the state of feeling' among Manchester 'factory-people'. (*MB*, Preface, pp. 3–4) The preface reminds 'the reader' that, in spite of recent

tendencies to feminise romance, the genre historically splits in two directions, treating both the adventures of chivalrous heroes and love stories. *Mary Barton* contains both kinds of romance. The novel's most parallel chivalrous and love romances, however, are not John's and Mary's, but John's and Esther's. *Mary Barton* traces the failure of both romance genres to address or redress the problems of 1840s industrial Manchester. John, a would-be chivalric Chartist and trade union hero for working-class Manchester, fails in his quest to reach any of his political goals, or to rescue himself, his colleagues, friends, and family from a perilous industrial environment, higher-class monsters, or the inner demons that beset working-class life, even though he slays the novel's largest dragon, rake and industrial tyrant, Harry Carson. Similarly, Esther, a would-be working-class bride of a higher-class officer, fails in her quest to rise in class through marriage. Instead, she falls in class when she is seduced and abandoned. She is bereft of a beloved only child, excluded from marriage, motherhood and family of origin, and driven to prostitution, drink, poverty, prison and the grave. Significantly, it is a grave she shares with John Barton: 'They laid her in one grave with John Barton. And there they lie without name, or initial, or date', a shared, unmarked plot that marks (markedly) the joint failure of both romance plots in 1840s England. (*MB*, ch. 38, p. 392)

Both John Barton and *Mary Barton*'s narrator are blind to the connections between the two kinds of romance plot so clearly articulated in the novel's structures. John Barton's rage is far from being the 'monomania' of class hatred that the narrator avers (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 169): rather, it is split between middle-class employers and working-class Esther. Barton, like the narrator, fails to recognise Esther as a fellow victim of higher-class exploitation and, in a rhetoric of hard-heartedness applied elsewhere to harsh employers (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 173 and ch. 16, p. 188), 'he hardened his heart against her for ever'. (*MB*, ch. 3, p. 23) Hardening produces the same responses in John that it produces in the ruling classes: he refuses to hear Esther just as Parliament refuses to hear the petition he co-presents and refuses to heed her request just as employers refuse the proposals of John's trade union. (*MB*, ch. 16, p. 188) John's failure to see any correlation between his own romance plot and Esther's, then, offers an early lesson in reading between the two kinds of romance plots.

Mary's plot, though indubitably a courtship plot, is more than that, encompassing both kinds of romance genre and succeeding in both where Esther's and John's fail. Likened to Esther and in a similar situation ('the very bodily likeness seemed to suggest a possibility of a similar likeness in their fate' - *MB*, ch. 11, p. 127), Mary resists higher-class seduction and exploitation and marries the man she desires, producing a surviving and thriving son, a new John, a son Johnnie, after John's death. Mary also succeeds in heroic and

chivalrous action. Schor has read Mary's quest for the alibi and appearance in court as heroic adventures in a public sphere. But more than this, in Mary's responses to two proposals of marriage – one from a working-class suitor and one from an employing-class suitor – Mary models correct social industrial behaviour for both classes, demonstrating both how the working classes can negotiate with and resist the exploitation of the employing classes and how the higher classes should respond to lower-class proposals and petitions.

If John's and Esther's are the novel's parallel romance plots, John's and Mary's romance plots are inversely related. Inverse relations, epitomised by my titular terms, 'politics of romance' and 'romance of politics', are most clearly manifest in the novel's representation of John's political ambitions as domestic, emotional, and irrational and Mary's romantic ambitions as social, political, and rational. The driving motivation for John's political activism is domestic, personal, and emotional: grief over the death of his son from starvation a stone's throw from 'shop windows where all edible luxuries are displayed' creates 'hoards of vengeance in his heart against the employers' who freely frequent these shops. (*MB*, ch. 3, p. 25) If John cannot hoard material possessions, he can hoard vengeance, emotionality, to fuel political action.

The novel sets Mary's romantic motivations in inverse contrast to John's political motivations. Unlike John's, represented as emotional, psychological, introspective, impractical and rooted in personal loss, Mary's are rational, material, strategic, social, pragmatic and aimed at communal gain: 'Mary was ambitious, and did not favour Mr Carson the less because he was rich and a gentleman'; 'Every one who had shown her kindness in her low estate should then be repaid a hundred-fold'. (*MB*, ch. 7, p. 81) Mary's romantic aims, in fact, encompass her father's political goals, for they seek to close the gap between Bartons and Carsons economically, socially, emotionally, and ideologically, with her father didactically in mind:

... her dear father, now oppressed with care, and always a disheartened, gloomy person. How she would surround him with every comfort she could devise (of course he was to live with them), till he should acknowledge riches to be very pleasant things and bless his lady-daughter! (*MB*, ch. 7, p. 81)⁴⁴

In detailing Mary's politics of romance and John's romance of politics, the narrator proves equally unreliable, figuring Mary's social ambitions as 'castles in the air'. (*MB*, ch. 7, p. 81) These 'castles in the air', however, 'become concretely realisable when Harry Carson proposes: 'I even offer you marriage, to satisfy your little ambitious heart'. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 137) The words of the proposal here acknowledge and reward Mary's social ambition. Moreover,

Mary's 'keen practical shrewdness' has been a major attraction for Harry, rendering her ambition further integral to her realisation of it. (*MB*, ch. 7, p. 81)

The inverse relationship of the two plots offers lessons from the courtship genre for the political genre. The novel makes much of the fact that Mary is not in love with Harry Carson, although she is infatuated with him and desires marriage with him. Although the narrator chides Mary's lack of emotion as much as she chides John's excess of emotion, it is precisely this lack of deeper emotion that strengthens her powers of attraction, her powers of negotiation, and renders her forceful and unflinching in her final rejection and condemnation of Harry. Mary consistently manifests greater power and efficacy in convincing the younger Carson of her social value and in gaining offers of economic equality from him than do the emotional John and his fellow activists in their dealings with the elder Carson and his ilk. While worker bodies sicken, starve and die without a speck of notice or shred of concern from their employers, Mary's body lends her bartering power and draws the energies, efforts and admiration of a mill heir. Harry 'let scarcely a day pass without contriving a meeting with the beautiful little milliner ... and afterwards never rested till he had freely, though respectfully, made her acquaintance in her daily walks'. (*MB*, ch. 7, pp. 80-81)

Mary's powers of persuasion exceed those of the strikers when her resistance and speeches drive Harry to amend his plan of exploiting her body and offer her terms of greater social and economic parity in marriage. By contrast, John's petitions, protests, speeches, marches, and strikes go unheeded by both Parliament and employers and reduce him to an analogy with Mary's aunt Esther, a marginalised street-walker disappointed by the higher classes, almost invisible and inaudible, misinterpreted, criminalised, and incarcerated when she is seen and heard.

When Mary rejects his marriage proposal, however, Harry turns from negotiation to violence. At this point, political and courtship plots begin to merge. Mary's rejection of Harry coincides with the workers' strike (itself a rejection of current relations with their employers) and Harry undertakes simultaneously to break Mary and the strikers, expressing the same mastering attitude and industrial rhetoric toward both: 'She'll come round ... Mind! I don't say I shall offer her *the same terms* again'. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 139, emphasis added) As Harry turns from proposals of marriage to threats of rape in Mary's plot (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 174), he turns from negotiation to aggression in John's plot, becoming 'the head and voice of the violent party among the masters'. (*MB*, ch. 16, p. 183) In Chapters 15 and 16, Gaskell tightly interweaves Harry's ploys, insults, and threats against Mary with his ploys, insults, and threats

against striking factory employees – so tightly that Harry's oppression of Mary and opposition to the strikers even appear in a single sentence: 'With all his letter-writing, his calling, his being present at the New Bailey, when investigation of any case of violence against knob-sticks was going on, he beset Mary more than ever'. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 174) The tight interweaving encourages readers to extend the moral condemnation they readily and conventionally levy on higher-class seducers of working-class virgins to factory owners who exploit working-class bodies.

Many critics have read Mary's refusal of Harry's marriage proposal and preference for Jem as a politically conservative rejection of upward mobility and affirmation of the class status quo. But Mary's rejection of Harry's proposal opens a space for a resounding condemnation of middle-class exploitation uncensored by the narrator. Mary not only condemns Harry's interest in her as sexually immoral, but also as self-interested and exploitative, pursued 'at the expense of the misery, the ruin' of another. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 138) These are precisely the condemnations John Barton levels against factory owners in the political plot, but when he expresses them, the narrator contradicts them emphatically: 'I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters'. (*MB*, ch. 3, p. 24) By contrast, in the seduction plot, the narrator does not censor and even supports Mary's outspoken critique of higher-class exploitation. If John by the end and the narrator throughout are apologetic to the middle classes for voicing working-class criticisms of them, Mary is the reverse, even retracting an earlier apology to the younger Carson: 'I said I was sorry, and humbly begged your pardon; that was before I knew what you were. Now I scorn you, sir'. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 138) Yet far from destroying Harry's interest in her, Mary's condemnation arouses greater desire in him: 'I am more in love with her than ever; even for this charming, capricious ebullition of hers'. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 139)

Mary receives two marriage proposals in a single chapter: one from mill heir Harry Carson and one from mill worker Jem Wilson. In her response to the former, she models lower-class negotiations with the higher classes; in her response to the latter, she models higher-class negotiations with the lower classes. The marriage proposals are tied to negotiations between employers and strikers, not only through plot structure, but also through a shared rhetoric of 'proposals' and of 'high' and 'low': for example, 'One or two [working-class suitors] would gladly have kept her company, but she held herself too high'. (*MB*, ch. 5, p. 43) Mary's attitudes and actions to working-class desires and proposals are marked by the same indifference and distance that the higher classes bear towards the lower classes in the novel: 'Mary was quite indifferent to any action of [Jem's] ... she had scarcely spoken a word to Jem; scarcely

looked at him; never noticed his beautiful [gift]'. (*MB*, ch. 5, p. 44 and ch. 8, p. 83) Thwarted desires in the romance plot and thwarted desires in the political plot are detailed on the same page. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 174) Mary and the mill owners are characterised by a shared rhetoric of obduracy in their actions. Like the employers, who respond with 'hardness' and 'unflinching resistance' to trade union proposals, Mary avers that 'when James Wilson asked me to marry him ... I was very hard and sharp in my answer'. (*MB*, ch. 15, pp. 173-74 and ch. 32, p. 325) The rhetoric of Mary's relenting towards Jem also mirrors the elder Carson's relenting towards his employees at the end of the novel: 'She wearied herself by proposing plans, and rejecting them'; she resolved to 'improve circumstances as they might turn up'; 'She had been very wrong, but now she would endeavour and do right ... until he saw her changed and repentant mind in her natural actions.' (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 132)

Just as Harry is the middle-class arch-villain of both courtship and political plots, Jem is the working-class hero of both plots. Mary's rejection of Harry's proposal is inextricably tied to her acceptance of Jem's. In the courtship plot, Mary's sudden abandonment of her lifelong Cinderella fantasy and equally sudden discovery of love for Jem reads most unconvincingly. Jem holds little value for a beautiful, intelligent, vivacious romantic heroine: he is pock-marked, foolish, awkward, tongue-tied, morose, violent, and self-destructive. It is only in the political plot that he emerges as a hero: the best worker in the mills, highly valued by his employers, kept on when most other employees are laid off, demonstrating the economic value of his body, and engaging in heroic acts of rescue when the mill catches fire. Mary's sudden change of heart rings utterly false in the courtship plot, but is completely consistent with the political plot, where she rewards a worthy worker and models a change of heart for hard factory employers. Moreover, her marriage to Jem models the committed, mutual lifelong partnership that the poem cited above advocates for employers and employees.

As Mary turns from rejection of, to solidarity with, her own class, her change of heart is expressed, significantly, in social and material terms: 'She now saw how vain, how nothing to her, would be all gaieties and pomps, all joys and pleasures, unless she might share them with Jem; yes, with him she had harshly rejected so short a time ago'. (*MB*, ch. 11, pp. 131-32) Conversely, Carson's change of heart is expressed in a rhetoric of romance, a rhetoric frequently used of marriage in Victorian courtship novels:

... the wish that lay nearest to his heart was ... that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognised that the interests of one were the interests of all ..., that hence it was most desirable to have ... workers ... bound

to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone ... (*MB*, ch. 37, p. 388)

The importance of accepting working-class proposals is further underscored by the violent responses of the rejected. Quite strikingly, the despair Jem expresses over Mary's rejection of his marriage proposal echoes John's despair over Parliament's rejection of his political proposal and Jem's envisioned state in the wake of romantic rejection is identical to John's actual state in the wake of political rejection:

'And is this the end of all my hopes and fears? The end of my life, I may say, for it is the end of all worth living for! ... Mary! you'll hear, maybe, of me as a drunkard, and maybe as a thief, and maybe as a murderer. Remember! when all are speaking ill of me, you will have no right to blame me, for it's your cruelty that will have made me what I feel I shall become'. (*MB*, ch. 11, p. 130)

When John returns from London, he declares: 'our rejection of that day will abide in my heart; and as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us'. (*MB*, ch. 9, p. 102) John loses hope and fear, deepens his opium addiction, and becomes a murderer. Jem fantasises about committing the same murder but, more importantly for this argument, first envisions killing Mary, the rejecter of his proposal: 'uprose the guilty longing for blood! ... Some one should die ... A vision of her pale, sweet face, with her bright hair, all bedabbled with gore, seemed to float constantly before his aching eyes'. (*MB*, ch. 14, p. 166) Jem's envisaged revenge on Mary, then, mirrors John's actual revenge on Harry. In the courtship plot, the heavier moral indictment rests on the party rejecting the proposal. In Jem's rhetoric, rejecters have 'no right to blame' violence in the rejected, being the causes and creators of that violence through their own 'cruelty'. That Harry is killed for political rather than romantic reasons further advances the view that political rejection is more likely than romantic rejection to drive a moral, sympathetic, working-class man to commit murder. Morally speaking, that the murder springs from the political plot rather than the courtship plot suggests that class oppression is a weightier sin than the seduction or rape of a virgin and likelier to produce real-world violence when legal and political judgments on higher-class exploiters fail to materialise.

Although Jem does not murder Harry, the victory of the courtship plot lies not only in Mary's triumph over Harry, but also in Jem's physical, romantic, and moral triumph over Harry. Jem's victory over Harry is neither concession nor compromise, but outright defeat. In choosing Jem, Mary affirms the value of working-class labour, epitomised by Jem's 'strong right arm', over

middle-class capital and all the 'gaieties and pomps, all joys and pleasures' it refuses to share with the working classes. (*MB*, ch. 11, pp. 131–32) It is probably this strong right arm, stronger than Harry's cane, that knocks Harry down in the fight between them and requires a policeman to defend the mill heir. This is, quite strikingly, the only act of violence by a working-class man that the narrator does not condemn, nor does the plot allow Jem to be punished for it. What's more, when Harry declines the policeman's offer to have Jem imprisoned, the narrator declares it 'justly' done, while the plot puts Jem 'out of hearing' of the policeman's warning. (*MB*, ch. 15, p. 180) The moral of this episode – that a worker may strike back if an employer strikes first and that no legal body should punish him for it – repeats in John's plot when the elder Carson does not, in the end, insist on legal retribution in a plot where his son provoked the blow that struck him down. In Jem's sense that his battle with Harry is a moral duty, one can glean a further moral for the political plot that stronger members of the working class may justifiably, even righteously, threaten violence against those who seek to exploit its weaker members.

The two plots move from inverse and parallel analogies to fusion and confusion in the two motives that emerge for Harry's murder: one from the courtship plot and one from the political plot. As Michael Wheeler and others have observed, even the murder weapon reinforces the connection: the gun John uses belongs to Jem; the bullet is wadded with a valentine bearing Mary's name in Jem's handwriting on one side and a poem crying for God to help the poor in Mary's handwriting on the other.¹⁵ The valentine, 'all bordered with hearts and darts', further symbolises the fusions of love and violence in *Mary Barton's* romance of politics and politics of romance. (*MB*, ch. 9, p. 113)

The novel refuses both to separate out these fusions into bipolar partisan ethics or melodramatic heroes and villains and to accept Christian scapegoating and innocent sacrifice for the sins of others. Although Jem is willing to suffer as scapegoat for John's crime, he is not permitted to do so. Although Job Legh, the novel's working-class sage, urges Mary to substitute the guilty party ('Best way, if you know'd him innocent, would be to find out the real murderer.' *MB*, ch. 22, p. 248), Mary refuses to set up a binarism of guilt and innocence: 'Jem was to be saved, while her father was also to be considered innocent.' She turns from theology and melodrama to reasoning and logic: 'If Jem was innocent ... he must have been somewhere else when the crime was committed'. From reasoning, Mary turns to legal action: 'She had heard of an *alibi*, and believed it might mean the deliverance she wished to accomplish'. (*MB*, ch. 22, p. 247) *Alibi*, then, precludes the injustice of scapegoating and bipolar melodramatic ethics because it requires readers and juries to reach

a conclusion of innocence through logical reasoning rather than through theological dogma or emotional manipulation.

The deliverance Mary accomplishes encompasses both courtship and political plots. Numerous critics have read Mary's quest for an alibi as an evasive or conservative digression from the more radical, political and social concerns of the novel. Tatsuhiro Ohno assesses that the murder, alibi quest, trial, and Mary's subsequent collapse comprise 37% of the novel.¹⁶ But the alibi simultaneously uses the legal system to save Jem from the gallows and to place John's judgment for class violence outside the legal system. Just as Jem is not imprisoned for striking Harry, so too, John is not executed for murdering Harry. Neither Jem nor John is punished by the legal system for violence to the higher classes, I argue, because that system affords no concomitant place to punish the violence done to the lower classes by the higher classes. It is not a just system for adjudicating economic and social disparities. In *Mary Barton*, the adjudication of guilt and innocence does not end with the elder Carson's discovery that John Barton killed Harry: it ends only with Carson's realisation of his own class guilt for the deaths of working-class sons and, by extension, for the death of his own son.

If mutual sympathy and brotherhood rather than hierarchical one-way sympathy are the novel's goals, they are achieved in *Mary Barton* only through the violence and the vengeance that the narrator condemns. Indeed, narration repeatedly fails the working classes: no account of working-class suffering, political polemic, or first-person testimony move employers or Parliament one whit. It is only when John kills Carson's only son that a middle-class mill owner comes to feel what the working classes feel, what John himself has felt over the death of his only son: devastating grief and raging revenge. It is empathy ushered in by violence. In the final analysis, it is precisely the emotion and violent action castigated by the narrator that ushers in Christian redemption and social change: 'Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom.' Such emotional brotherhood has a socially level-ling effect:

The mourner before him was *no longer the employer; a being of another race*, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; *no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor, and desolate old man.* (MB, ch. 35, p. 366, emphases added)

It is John, 'The cause of all this woe', not Carson, who initiates social change. (MB, ch. 35, p. 366) Carson cedes power only after encountering the equalising

physical and emotional force of Barton. Working-class emotion channelled into an vengeful violence produces a more equitable distribution of wealth.

The empathy goes both ways. Just as Carson now feels what John has felt formerly, so too, John now feels what Carson *should* have felt formerly: remorse, shame, and self-reproach for causing the deaths of so many working-class sons. In the same year that *Mary Barton* was published, Friedrich Engels argued that 'when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet ... its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.'¹⁷

The motif of revenge further permeates the overtly religious ending. John dies from feelings Carson should have felt more intensely and for years – 'Conscience had given the mortal wound to his earthly frame' (*MB*, ch. 36, p. 373) – and his death manifests the punishment Carson himself deserves. Moreover, in the exchange, John emerges morally superior. Although both repent, Barton only repents taking one life; Carson repents a whole way of life.

However, in spite of all, *Mary Barton's* Manchester proves unready to concede innocence to an alibi. Not only does it continue to require a guilty party, it also cannot imagine a political motive for murder. Even the wisest of them, Job Legh, admits: 'till I heard what John Barton had to say yon night, I could not have seen what reason he had for doing it; while in the case of Jem, any one who looked at Mary Barton might have seen a cause for jealousy, clear enough'. (*MB*, ch. 37, p. 383) *Mary Barton's* Manchester may well reflect Elizabeth Gaskell's Manchester and Gaskell's sense of her readers' likely failure to glean the reading lessons of *Mary Barton's* romance of politics and politics of romance.

Today, *Mary Barton's* political and romantic relations continue to frustrate critics and to arouse the judgments of left-wing bipolar political ethics as much as it did right-wing partisan political ethics in 1848. Moreover, Mary's quest for the alibi not only qualifies Uglow's claims about the moral value of melodrama, it further proves problematic for a feminist reading like Schor's, for it is as much an attempt to save the family patriarch from the consequences of his actions as it is to rescue a falsely accused innocent or achieve a woman's desires. Both Mary and Jem take enormous risks and are willing to make immense sacrifices for patriarchy. Jem's explanation of his willingness to serve as scapegoat for John's crime is laden with patriarchal rhetoric: 'No one would have had me get out of the scrape by implicating an old friend, – *my father's old friend, and the father of the girl I loved*'. (*MB*, ch. 37, p. 382, emphasis added) His subsequent willingness to emigrate rather than expose

the crimes of a guilty patriarch (even after that patriarch's death) further troubles a feminist reading. Although he claims his ongoing protection of the dead patriarch's reputation arises from devoted chivalric protection of Mary's feelings, social position and children, it is inconceivable that a dead father's reputation could affect them more than a living husband's. Moreover, he stands in the same relation to Mary's children as Mary's father was to her. The explanation is therefore unconvincing and illogical.

While a majority of recent critics reads Jem's emigration as indicative of Gaskell's despair of any solution to class conflict in 1848 England, Jem does not emigrate because of class conflict or poverty or because there is no hope of industrial reform, but rather because he still carries John Barton's guilt. The novel despairs not of solutions to social, political, and economic problems, but rather of her readers' willingness to understand and tackle them apart from bipartisan politics and bipolar ethics.

Indeed, far from despairing of solutions to class conflict, *Mary Barton* offers two: one from John's romance of politics and one from Mary's politics of romance. As we have seen, John's romance of politics concludes with levelling empathy and mutual penitence and social reform ushered in by working-class violence. Mary's politics of romance concludes with a rejection of English middle-class social and economic values. As the trajectory of John's plot drives him from political action and social realism into passion and melodrama, the trajectory of Mary's moves her from romantic passivity and melodramatic seduction through assertive class and legal action to detachment and independence. Mary frees herself from higher-class oppression, not by becoming like them, as she initially dreamed, or by violently forcing them to become like her, as her father has done, but rather by rejecting what they value and the general perception of the higher classes as the possessors and controllers of all that is valued in society. Unlike her father, envisioned by Job going 'through his penance humbly and meekly in t'other place' (*MB*, ch. 37, p. 386), a disembodied morally ambiguous afterlife, Mary goes to her physical new world owing the employing classes nothing and requiring nothing of them. She further rejects membership in an industrial class that continues to exploit its workers.

In a letter, Gaskell wrote:

I believe what I have said in *Mary Barton* to be perfectly true, but by no means the whole truth; and I have always felt deeply annoyed at anyone, or any set of people who chose to consider that I had manifested the whole truth; I do not think it is possible to do this in any *one* work of fiction.¹⁸

But her intertwining of the romance of politics and the politics of romance

in *Mary Barton* presents a much less ambivalent political position, far greater literary skill, and a more complex set of reading positions than have been hitherto allowed.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Macdonald Daly (London: Penguin, 1996; originally published 1848), ch. 3, p. 23; hereafter, *MB* with chapter and page numbers in the text.
2. Raymond Williams, *Culture and society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London: Hogarth, 1990; originally published 1958), pp. 87-90.
3. Stephen Gill, introduction to the Penguin edition of *Mary Barton* (London: Penguin, 1970; reprinted 1985), p. 22 and p. 21.
4. Rosemarie Bodenheimer 'Private grief and public acts in *Mary Barton*', *Dickens Studies Annual* 9 (1981), p. 204.
5. Bodenheimer, p. 208.
6. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 'Why political novels have heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*', *Novel* 18 (1985), p. 127 and p. 136.
7. Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 15.
8. Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 199; Peter Brooks, *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama and the mode of excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
9. Simon Dentith, 'Generic diversity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*', *Gaskell Society Journal* 11 (1997), pp. 43-44, at p. 52 and p. 44.
10. Harriet Guest, 'The deep romance of Manchester: Gaskell's "Mary Barton"', *The regional novel in Britain 1800-1990*, ed. K. Snell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 79, p. 98 and p. 95.
11. See, for example, Dedre Gentner, *Mechanisms of analogical learning* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989) and more recently the work on analogy in *The Cambridge handbook of thinking and reasoning*, eds. Keith James Holyoak and Robert G. Morrison, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
12. Bodenheimer, p. 208.
13. The passages read: Carson 'held the dying man propped in his arms ... John Barton lay a corpse in Mr Carson's arms.'
14. The narrator praises Mary's concern for her father as the one virtue of her social ambition, again foregrounding the way in which Mary's courtship plot is placed in the service of John's political plot.
15. Michael Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), p. 50.
16. See, for example, Gill (n. 3, above), and Tatsuhiro Ohno, 'Is *Mary Barton* an Industrial Novel?', *Gaskell Society Journal* 15 (2001), pp. 14-29, as p. 16., p. 16.
17. This passage from *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* is cited in Macdonald Daly's introduction to the Penguin edition of *Mary Barton* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. xxii.
18. Letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, cited in Angus Easson, ed., *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 86.